



Figure 5. Hypothetical dispersal routes for Bald Eagles wintering on the Skagit River, Washington.

## SNOW GOOSE TAKEN BY PEREGRINE FALCON

by  
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While working with four companions near Rathbun Reservoir in south central Iowa on 1 October 1975, I heard geese calling and saw two large birds, presumably geese, flying in a rather erratic manner approximately 150 m above the ground and perhaps 0.4 km from our position. At that moment, a member of our party located the main flock, and everyone watched as 20 Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*) passed directly overhead. As I turned to relocate the two birds I had been watching, I saw an unidentifiable mass of wings and bodies tumbling rapidly toward the ground. At approximately 30 m above the ground, the tumbling ceased abruptly, and we observed a falcon, with cupped wings, struggling to support a weakly flopping goose. The raptor had a single talon fastened in the abdomen of the goose but seemed unable to support the weight of its prey. The pair continued down almost vertically and hit a low, brush-covered hill less than 200 m from our position. A similar aerial tumbling sequence involving a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) and a crow (presumably *Corvus brachyrhynchos*) was reported by Hager (Bent 1938).

Within a few seconds, the falcon reappeared and began to leisurely circle the area. Almost immediately it was surrounded by 1,500–2,000 blackbirds of unidentified species which were staging in the area. At times the falcon was completely engulfed in a swirling mass of blackbirds; however, it did not seem alarmed or even concerned. Occasionally the falcon would make a sudden change in its flight path, and the blackbirds would scatter only to reform in a flock surrounding the raptor. Falcons are not immune to attacks by other birds. Tufts (1973) reported bird census-takers in Nova Scotia saw a Peregrine being mobbed by about 60 Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*).

Our falcon made no attempt to return to its prey and eventually left the area. During this spectacular aerial display, the raptor approached our position several times enabling us to see the facial markings and brown-streaked breast we identified as those of an immature Peregrine. It is unlikely we misidentified the falcon since it did not seem large enough to be a Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*), did not have the black axillars of a Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*), and was considerably out of the normal range for both of these species.

A few minutes after the falcon left the area, we located an injured juvenile Snow Goose (blue phase) near the point of impact. The goose was unable to fly; muscle tissue was torn from the left leg, and several puncture wounds were observed in the abdominal and lower breast region (fig. 1).

Several authors have reported Peregrines taking large prey. Bent (1938) listed Ring-necked Pheasants (*Phasianus colchicus*) and ducks up to the size of Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*). Cade (1960) reported Brant (*Branta bernicla*) in Alaskan Peregrine nests. In Britain, Witherby et al. (1939) listed Brant, Barnacle Goose (*Branta leucopsis*), Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*), and Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*). Eurasian records (Utendörfer et al., 1952) list Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*), and Red-breasted Goose (*Branta ruficollis*).

Hayes (1976) reported his trained Prairie Falcon (which is similar in size to a Peregrine) took several Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) before its shoulder was broken by the mate of a goose it was holding. Steve Sherrod (pers. comm.) related a number of recent accounts of trained falcons pursuing and attacking geese. The following is Sherrod's personal account of one of these incidents. "In December 1970, I flushed a pair of Snow Geese (one blue and one white phase) from a pond inadvertently as I approached another pond covered with ducks. My Peregrine stooped and knocked the blue phase down in the water. After circling several times and being unable to grab the goose in the water, she then flew after the white phase and knocked it down on land. The goose assumed the threat posture with wings out and arched neck, hissing, as the falcon stooped back and forth hitting it in the head. Finally the falcon bound to the head of the goose sidewise so that the extended wing of the falcon was at right angles to the wings of the goose. When I arrived, the left humerus of the falcon was broken although the bird clung to the head of the goose. The powerful wing flapping of the captured goose had apparently caused the injury." Sherrod concluded that Peregrine Falcons are marginally capable of killing geese, and there is a great possibility for injury to the falcon either directly in the associated battle or indirectly from mobbing by conspecific flock members.

While trained Peregrines (and presumably wild Peregrines as well) are capable of taking geese, I am not aware of a record in the literature where a wild Peregrine was actually observed taking a Snow Goose.

I am indebted to S. Sherrod, G. Crim, and L. Crim for their review of this paper.

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